

Augusta Congressman and local veterans join together to denounce the proposed fee and premium increase in military retiree health care

Augusta, GA - On the Monday before Congress is expected to return to Washington to continue debate and consideration of a federal budget proposal that imposes unfair health care cost increases on the nation's retired veterans, Augusta Congressman John Barrow (Georgia - 12th District) today joined with veterans from across the Augusta area to denounce the plan.

"America can do better than nickel and dime our retired veterans," Barrow said at a press conference held out front of the Augusta VA Medical Center. "These proposed increases are a slap in the face to the men and women who have served, and they send the wrong message to our soldiers fighting for our country over in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"The way I see it, our veterans have already paid for their healthcare," Barrow continued. "They paid for it through their service to our country. In exchange for giving us the best years of their lives, they were promised health care after they retired."

That was the deal, yet some in Washington are unwilling to keep that deal now, and that's a disgrace."

In February, the Department of Defense announced that it would, for the first time, increase annual enrollment fees for TRICARE Prime, the military's managed care option - doubling the fees for enlisted retirees and tripling those fees for working-age retired officers. Also for the first time, retirees who use TRICARE Standard would pay an annual enrollment fee in addition to their deductible.

The Defense Department's proposal was included in the President's Federal Budget proposal.

The House of Representatives was slated to vote on the budget two weeks ago, but the vote was postponed until after the Easter recess.

That vote could now come up as early as this week.

While the increase would not apply to military retirees over the age of 65, tens of thousands in Georgia would still see an increase. According to statistics provided by the Department of Defense, there were 79,288 military retirees and retiree dependents under the age of 65 living in Georgia as of March 2006. Barrow noted that the numbers are sure to increase as the thousands of soldiers who returning from duty and Iraq and Afghanistan eventually retire from the service.

"Earlier this year, I held town hall meetings with veterans all over Georgia's 12th District," Barrow said.

"And at every single meeting, one of the top concerns raised was this proposal to increase TRICARE premiums and fees.

Even last week, at the town halls I hosted in many of the smaller rural communities, I heard from a lot of veterans who just don't understand how Congress can let this happen."

In Congress, Barrow is already moving to block these increases. He recently cosponsored the *Military Retirees' Health Care Protection Act* (H. R. 4949)

, which would not only block these pending increases, but would also require that any future increase in military healthcare fees must receive approval from Congress before being implemented. Under current law, the Department of Defense has authority to increase TRICARE fees and premiums without getting permission from Congress.

H.R. 4949 already has 138 cosponsors and is currently being considered by the House Committee on Armed Services.

For a complete breakdown of the fee schedule for all the proposed increases in TRICARE, visit: <http://www.tricare.osd.mil/MHSToolkit/download/STB-Factsheet.pdf>.

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